

WHAT I DID ON MY SUMMER VACATION [SETAK'S STORY]

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SD11008.24

After two months, *Avenger's* Chief Science Officer, Setak, was returning to Star Fleet Command. With the ship in dock for refurbishing and reconditioning, along with standard systems maintenance and upgrades, the crew had all been given leave and told, in no uncertain terms, to take some time to relax and decompress before the ship went out on its next extended tour. As his leave came to an end, though, Setak had secured passage aboard the *Cygnus*-class scout *U.S.S. Tucana* to return to the Sol System, its destination after having passed through the 40 Eridani Star System, home to his native world of Vulcan.

Setak sat in his cabin aboard the *Tucana*, gazing at the image on his desktop viewer, which was being transmitted down from the bridge, and was a duplicate of what the personnel there were seeing. In the quiet of the small room—guest quarters on a scout weren't typically elaborate—he reached out and picked up a datapadd, and thumbed its activation control.

“Personal Log, Stardate 11008.24:

My leave is now almost over, as the vessel on which I am traveling is nearly back in Sol System space. The last couple of months have been rewarding, both as an opportunity to visit with my family, whom I had not seen in person in several years, and to reacquaint myself with my homeworld. It was never my intention to avoid visiting Vulcan, but the press of duties had kept me from taking the time to do so, and I had decided, after some consideration, to take advantage of my extended leave to remediate that lack. In the end, the experience was a rewarding one in all ways for me, both as a family member and a traveler. I can now return to my duties as a Star Fleet officer with both a refreshed attitude and memories to take with me until I can again return home.”

Setak ended his log entry and leaned back in his chair, allowing his mind to process the memories of his experiences in recent weeks. He had left Earth a few days after the *Avenger* had returned from its last five-year tour, booking passage on a commercial liner of the *Stellaria*-class to make the journey over several days. The liner, named the *S.S. Silmaril*, reached Vulcan three days later. Setak disembarked and proceeded to his first destination, his family's home in the city of Ta'vistar.

A homecoming was, for Setak, a somewhat uncertain experience. His parents, when he was young, had disagreed with his choice to enter Star Fleet. They felt that he should remain closer to home. Setak could understand their position, but the call of the unknown was a strong one, and in the end, and after much consideration, he had chosen to heed it. While his parents, Syndak and T'Meral, took the decision in stride, they had yet to fully accept it, especially after his sister had also chosen to join Star Fleet, and the result was that his visits home were often awkward. Consequently, he did not often choose to return to Vulcan when he took his leaves. On this occasion, however, he had decided that enough time had passed that a visit was warranted, not only to see his parents, but also his brother, who had remained close to home and taught at the Vulcan Science Academy facilities in Ta'vistar.

Syndak and T'Meral owned a mid-sized home on the edge of Ta'vistar's "Academy Quarter" and "Old Quarter". It had been designed by Syndak himself, and he was known to gain satisfaction from the favorable responses he received from visitors. Carefully created to be aesthetically pleasing while not breaking from the typical Vulcan habit of avoiding the temptation to "overdesign", the house was a testament to both architectural restraint and architectural effectiveness.

Setak walked along a pathway to the outer gate of the property, and pressed a finger to the annunciator switch. A light went on, and he turned his attention to the viewer set above the switch. The small screen glowed to life, and resolved to an image of a Vulcan woman with dark brown hair cut to a moderate length and dark eyes. Seeing him, she didn't smile, but her eyes lit up slightly, betraying her pleasure at seeing him again. "Setak, my son. Welcome. Please come in." The gate's lock released with a soft click.

Slinging his duffel over his shoulder, Setak stepped through the gateway and walked up to the front door of the house. The door slid open at his approach, and he entered the foyer, his boots clicking against the tiled flooring. His mother came around a corner from the house's central hallway and approached him. "Setak," she said, her mellifluous voice taking the *Avenger's* chief science officer back many years and to a simpler time, "it is pleasant to see you again. Come, your father is in the sitting room."

The two walked down the corridor and into an airy room with wide windows, which offered an impressive view of the area just beyond the family's grounds. Syndak was seated in a large, comfortable-looking chair facing the windows, but he turned at the sound of their footsteps and rose to greet his son. "Please, do come in, Setak. You may

leave your bag in the corner there. Sit with us, and share what has been happening with you. It has been a long time since you visited."

"I am sorry for that, father," Setak said, lowering himself into a chair to which his father had gestured. T'Meral sat next to Syndak, in a chair that Setak could immediately see was one she commonly used.

"Has Star Fleet kept you so occupied that you could not visit your home from time to time?" Syndak asked. The question seemed innocuous, but Setak could hear the undercurrent of disapproval, nonetheless.

"In part, yes," Setak replied. He took a breath, and then went on. "However, as both of you no doubt recall, my last several visits have been uncomfortable for us all. I must admit that, while I might wish to visit more frequently, I have avoided doing so, because I do not wish to create discomfort, for either you or myself. So it is true that I have chosen other destinations for some of my leaves, but not because I do not wish to see either you, father, or you, mother."

"Were you aware," asked Syndak, "that we also invited your sister to join us, in hopes of having the family together at this time?"

"No, I was not," Setak responded.

"It is no matter; we did not share that with you," T'Meral said.

"That is true," Syndak agreed. "Unfortunately, T'Penra was unable to join us. Her ship is on a mission, far from the Federation's inner star systems."

Setak nodded. "I understand." In fact, he knew where the *Avendesta* was, patrolling along the Romulan Neutral Zone. As tensions between the Federation and Romulans had increased, and while the diplomats attempted to forge a treaty to defuse those tensions, starships kept a watchful eye along the border between the two powers, in case the Romulans might choose to take any unfortunate actions. However, that was classified information, which he could not share with his civilian parents. "It is important to recognize that what she and her crewmates are doing is important to the security of the Federation and, indirectly, to our own here on Vulcan."

"And yet she, like you, did not have to be a part of that. It was a choice of yours."

"Yes, father, it was. It would seem that both T'Penra and I, each in our own way, were drawn to the stars by the curiosity many Vulcans share."

Syndak sighed, ever so slightly. "Please, Setak, do not misunderstand. I recognize the attraction that Star Fleet holds for many people. But I also recognize that its methods are not always ideal for Vulcans. That, however, is not why I have, over the years, been concerned by your and your sister's choices."

Setak raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Then, father, what concerns you? And why have you never spoken of this before?"

Syndak traded glances with T'Meral, and she nodded. "Setak," Syndak went on, "as you may know, I have not often paid close attention to Star Fleet's activities.

However, an incident was reported in our own system that received wide attention on Vulcan, and among those who typically do not follow the news far beyond our world. One of the research facilities in our asteroid belt came under immediate threat from another asteroid, which was on an unexpected collision course, likely from some other impact. Several Star Fleet vessels responded to the situation and were able to redirect the threatening asteroid. This proved more challenging than had been initially expected, and while the goal was achieved, it cost the lives of several Star Fleet personnel."

"Your father did not sleep well for a period of time after that," T'Meral added.

"Indeed?" Setak said. "Interesting."

"If," Syndak said, "you both will allow me to continue...?"

"Of course, my husband," said T'Meral.

"Thank you, my wife," Syndak said dryly. His right eyebrow quirked upward just slightly, and Setak imagined that a Human might have rolled his eyes. "As I was saying, several lives were lost during the mission. None were people whom I knew, or of whom I had even heard. None were even Vulcan. There were no casualties among the crew of the research facility. And yet, for days afterward, I thought about the people who had lost their lives."

"It is true, father, that Star Fleet duty is not always safe," Setak said. "But Star Fleet personnel are very well trained and know how to minimize the risks."

"Minimize, yes, but risk cannot be eliminated entirely. An old saying expresses the thought that one takes risks simply getting out of bed."

"A life spent entirely in bed," Setak commented, "would likely be an unrewarding one."

"Yes," Syndak agreed.

"I couldn't imagine such an existence," added T'Meral.

"Nor I," Setak affirmed.

"As I thought about those people," Syndak said, returning to his primary topic, "I could not help but consider that two of my own children were among those taking risks, every day, and I was forced to consider the potential that something similar could happen to them, that events many light-years from here could deprive me of my family. And as I considered this, I had to face the reality that this feeling had been within me, unacknowledged, for many years, and that it likely colored all of my perceptions of Star Fleet, and of what both you and your sister were doing as Star Fleet personnel."

Setak thought for a moment before he replied. This was almost an emotional statement that his father had just made, and while it was completely understandable, it would be unseemly to respond to this revelation by pointing that out and potentially insulting his father. "Father, I understand. I have suffered losses while in the service, myself. Losses of friends and companions. Do you recall the fire-lizard that I had for a time, some years ago?"

"I remember your communications that mentioned it. You never brought it here, though."

"He was an emotional being, and telepathic on some level, and it might have been uncomfortable for you to have him here."

"Do not forget, Setak, even while you are among Humans," T'Meral told him, "that Vulcans do have emotions. It is our mastery of them that sets us apart."

"Indeed, mother, I have not forgotten," Setak told her. "Still, I did not wish to bring so overtly emotional a telepathic being into your home. I deemed it a matter of respect." As T'Meral nodded, Setak went on. "As you also know, he and all our other fire-lizards sacrificed themselves to save the *Avenger* from destruction, and I, along with over 70 of my crewmates, experienced a loss far beyond that of a simple pet, even if not at the level of a fellow person. It was a very difficult time for us."

"Your communications did speak of that, as well, Setak," Syndak said.

"So I can well understand the concerns regarding loss, father."

"Of course," Syndak replied. "I, however, had never allowed myself to consider this, if I may say so, logically, and extrapolate these feelings to their natural conclusions. The reality has been that I cannot dissuade you or your sister from pursuing Star Fleet careers, and it was necessary to reconcile my perceptions of that organization in the context of my preference that you both had stayed closer to home and pursued somewhat safer professions."

"Father..."

"Please, allow me to finish. Something I have not said to you, or to T'Penra, in a number of years is that I am not disappointed in either of you as persons. You have done me and your mother honor, and whether or not your choices are congruent with my own for you, you have done well and I respect and appreciate that in each of you. Perhaps spurred by the events in our asteroid belt, I eventually decided that there were things that could not go unsaid any longer, nor could I allow any concerns on your part with regard to my own perceptions prevent you from seeing yourself as welcome in our family home. I would not want any of my children to stay away unnecessarily, especially in circumstances where they do face risk as part of their professions." Syndak paused, finally, and took a breath. Then he gazed directly into Setak's eyes. "Do you understand, my son?"

Setak returned his father's gaze, his thoughts awl. This was in no way the conversation he'd expected to be having when he walked in through the front door of his parents' home, and while he'd prepared mentally for many possibilities, this had not been among them. It had been a long time since his father had reached out to him, and for a moment, he was not sure what to make of it. He was also, peripherally, aware of his mother's expectant gaze, and he could only assume that his parents had discussed this extensively prior to his arrival.

Finally, Setak spoke. "I do understand, father. I would be dishonest if I claimed to have expectant this mode of conversation today, but I am...pleased that we have been able to engage in it. Even if my choices were different than

those for which you may have hoped, I never stopped respecting and honoring both you and mother, and it is, admittedly, a relief to hear you say what you have said. Thank you, father. This means a great deal, and I am sure it will also mean such to T'Penra when the time comes for you to share it with her, as well."

"I believe that T'Penra is planning to take leave time when her current mission has concluded," T'Meral said. "We have spoken of her coming to Vulcan for a visit."

"It is well, then," Setak said. "I will not, as the Humans like to say, 'spoil the surprise'."

A Human might have chuckled. His parents simply each raised an eyebrow in that so-typical Vulcan manner.

With the ice thus broken, conversation came more easily, and the three of them spent some time catching up on family and local events, some of the more interesting stories that Setak could share regarding his experiences aboard the *Avenger* in recent months, and the news from around the Federation. Syndak, it turned out, had recently won an award for his design of a series of structures to be built in the mountain foothills of the L'langon range, not far from the city of ShiKahr. He responded to Setak's curiosity by calling up the design files, and soon the two men were deeply engrossed in discussions of design, structural engineering, and even aesthetics as applied to both Vulcans and non-Vulcans. T'Meral was pleased to see them getting along so well, but the subject matter did not, in the end, hold her attention, and she excused herself to attend to the evening meal.

Not long afterward, the house annunciators chimed, revealing the presence of another visitor at the front gate. T'Meral again went to the door, and soon after she returned with her elder son, Sorvok. As he entered the sitting room and found Setak and Syndak in the depths of their discussion, he, too, raised an eyebrow, but allowed himself the barest hint of a pleased smile.

"I see my prodigal brother has returned," he said, with the deep, booming voice that made him quite striking as an instructor at the local facilities of the Vulcan Science Academy.

"It is agreeable to see you, Sorvok," Setak said, rising and turning to face his brother.

"And you as well," Sorvok replied, striding up to Setak. The two men gripped arms in a gesture of comity which was common to so many humanoid races. "So, I trust the life of a Star Fleet officer has been good to you?"

"So far, yes, though it also rarely fails to surprise."

"I can imagine it would not."

"And you, my brother?"

"I am well, thank you," Sorvok said. "As ever, I continue to try my best to challenge young minds to think about their world and discover its secrets. From time to time, we even use the information that you have been kind enough to send me from your missions. It has proven effective to draw contrasts between our traditional approaches to learning and discovery and the ones applied by other races in the galaxy."

Out of the corner of his eye, Setak noticed Syndak raising his eyebrow slightly, but he nodded and kept his attention on Sorvok. "I am pleased to know that the letters and other materials have proven helpful."

"I am only disappointed that our sister has not provided such materials lately."

"T'Penra is serving aboard a vessel that more often undertakes high-security, classified missions," Setak explained. "It is likely that she is less able to share information."

"Of course," Sorvok replied, taking the explanation in stride. "If I may change the subject, have you had an opportunity to see the city as yet?"

"Not yet," Setak answered. "I came directly to our family home from the spaceport. I do hope to spend some time both here and reacquainting myself with other places on Vulcan. It has been a considerable time since I did so."

"If you can arrange a time to visit the Academy while I have a class in session, you would be welcome to speak to the students."

"I would not wish to disrupt your class..."

"It would be no disruption," Sorvok assured him. "I would consider it a teaching opportunity."

"Very well, then. I would be pleased to consider it. Thank you, Sorvok."

At that moment, T'Meral returned to tell her family that the evening meal was ready, and they all moved to the dining area to take their repast. Conversation remained on lighter topics while they ate, and eventually moved to the question of recommendations for where Setak should visit during his stay on Vulcan. Both Syndak and T'Meral were quite insistent that he stay with them for at least some of his leave, and visit sites close enough to be reached in a day. Setak agreed, though he also emphasized that he wished not to be an imposition.

Syndak favored him with a look that, among Humans, might have been accompanied by the exclamation, "Nonsense!" or "Poppycock!" His actual statement was much calmer. "My son, please do not feel that it would be any sort of imposition."

"Thank you, father. I would find spending time here quite pleasing."

"Then it is settled."

The conversation moved gradually to the topic of itinerary, and it was quickly decided that Setak would begin with a tour of Ta'vistar. After he'd caught up with the happenings in his home town, he'd head out across the planet, visiting such locations as the cities of ShiKahr and ShanaiKahr, the fortress at Pelasht, the Fire Plains, the L'langon Mountains, Mount Seleya, and even the Plateau of Gol, if time allowed.

In many ways, Setak's journeys around his homeworld were far more relaxing than he'd anticipated, with the shadow of his uncertainties with his parents now lifted, and it became a comfortable thing to routinely use their home as his base of operations. As planned, he spent his first week exploring Ta'vistar and discovering what had changed

and what had not about the city. Also, as discussed, Setak and Sorvok arranged a visit to Sorvok's class on the philosophies of science. As Sorvok had suspected they would be, the students were enthralled by Setak's tales of working alongside scientists of many races during *Avenger's* journeys through the galaxy, and the often striking contrasts in how they approached problem-solving. For his part, Setak was impressed with the insightful questions they asked, even if some of them had to be responded with, "I am sorry that I cannot fully answer that question; it involves classified information."

When the class was done, most of the students stayed to chat informally with both Sorvok and Setak, and Setak was quick to note that many of the students had a keen interest in Star Fleet and what it was doing. It seemed that the event on the asteroid facility had been big news around the planet, and many people had followed the story through to its conclusion. Setak did encourage those who wished to learn more about Star Fleet to contact the recruiting offices on Vulcan, but emphasized that there were many options for those who wished to explore the universe.

Setak eventually took his leave from the students, and joined his brother for a quiet dinner, apart for once from their parents. The two traded stories for a few hours, looking at how their lives had diverged over the years, and seeing what the effects had been.

Finally, Sorvok gazed at his brother and asked, "Setak, have you ever considered what your life might have been like had you stayed here on Vulcan, rather than joining Star Fleet?"

Setak thought for a moment, considering how to frame his reply. "In fact," he began, "I have. I have long felt it might have been as rewarding, although in very different ways. However, my choices were what they were, and I cannot claim any regrets or uncertainties about them at this stage in my life. The reality is that Star Fleet has been a positive force in my life, perhaps more so than most others, and I am satisfied with the person I have become as a result of serving not only the Federation, but also Vulcan, as an officer in Star Fleet."

Sorvok nodded, the slightest hint of a satisfied smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Well said, Setak. I had wondered if that might be your answer. It is good to know that you have been satisfied with your choices. A few years ago, I asked your sister a similar question, and she responded much as you have. In all honesty, my own reply is similar, as well, even if my choice was different." He leaned in a little closer to Setak. "There is even the possibility of beginning a family. I have not yet spoken of this with our parents, but I have met a lovely woman, one who happens also to be unbounded, and our time together has been rewarding on many levels."

"I am pleased to know of this, and gratified that you have taken me into your confidence. I will, of course, not share this with our parents until you are prepared to do so."

“Thank you, Setak. I will be sure to keep you apprised of the course of events.” Sorvok raised an eyebrow. “And you? Has there been anyone whom you have fancied?”

“I have not yet found the right person to whom to make a lasting commitment,” Setak told him honestly, “although I have found women with whom I have enjoyed sharing stimulating relationships.”

“I understand. Well, I wish us both well in that endeavor in years to come.”

“Agreed.”

Soon afterward, the men ended their dinner, and Setak returned to his family home to finalize the plans for his forays to other portions of the planet. Most were far enough that coming back nightly to Ta’vistar would not be practical, so arrangements had been made for Setak to travel in a wide loop around the large continent of Na’nam, traveling roughly from east to west, and ending his journey back in Ta’vistar for one more day before leaving Vulcan and traveling back to Earth to return to the *Avenger*.

The next morning, he bid farewell to his parents and brother, and embarked on an air transport for the city of ShanaiKahr, one of several cities that housed facilities of the planetary government. As the transport approached, he could see that the great towers which had dominated the skyline for so long were still there, but there were fewer of them, as modern Vulcan architecture had become more attuned to the planetary environment, and less focused on great, upthrust towers inspired by the shapes of swords.

Walking the city’s streets, it was easy for Setak to see why the city had a reputation as one of the most cosmopolitan communities on Vulcan. Amidst the many Vulcans who lived and worked in the city, there were a surprising number of people from a variety of Federation worlds, and even from places that the *Avenger’s* science officer knew were not a part of the UFP. There were even a few Klingons to be seen, though with the détente of the past decade and a half, this was less uncommon, and less surprising, than it might once have been.

Setak made a point of stopping into a number of the city’s museums and other learning center, watching and listening quietly as the people around him went about their days. In some ways, he mused, he was as much a tourist here as the Klingons, or Andorians, or Humans. He had stayed away from Vulcan perhaps too long, he mused. But, then, that was what this trip was supposed to be about: reconnecting with the world of his birth.

After several days in ShanaiKahr, Setak moved on to ShiKahr. The great circular city, located at the edge of the Sas-a-shar Desert and not far from the foothills of the L’langon Mountains, was perhaps the most famous city on Vulcan, not least because it was the home of Ambassadors Sarek and Spock. It also was the location of the United Earth Embassy, the major campus of the Vulcan Science Academy, and additional facilities of the Vulcan government. Almost every offworlder who came to visit Vulcan had to pay a visit to ShiKahr, and if someone happened to catch a glimpse of Sarek or Spock going about

their lives, it was considered a singular honor. The one thing one did not do was try to invade either of the ambassadors’ privacy, especially at their home. The house itself had effective security, of course, but to try to bother the ambassadors at home was considered to be in the very poorest taste.

Setak enjoyed his time in ShiKahr. Not only was it a welcoming place for non-residents, but he found that it was very relaxing to wander through the parkland belts in the outer rings of the metropolis. And when he wasn’t enjoying the parklands, the museums and restaurants were stimulating places to appreciate what the city had to offer. Perhaps the only awkwardness came when several Human women recognized him from some newscast or other that had covered a mission in which the *Avenger* had been involved, and they proceeded to treat him as a minor celebrity. While Setak had no particular objections to the company of intelligent and attractive women, he very much preferred not to be fawned over, and the three young ladies in question crossed that line on more than one occasion. Finally, he was able to extricate himself from the situation with a modicum of grace, and if the price was, in the end, his autograph on a few napkins, he decided that he could live with that. Still, after that incident he did retreat to one of the meditation areas in the hotel in which he was staying.

After ShiKahr, Setak moved on to a brief stop at Mount Seleya. Famous for being the location of the Hall of Ancient Thought and the holding place for hundreds of katric arks, it was also known as the location where Spock’s fal-tor-pan—refusion—had occurred, and had itself gained a sort of celebrity status around the Federation. The adepts who resided at the monastery at Seleya were more than a bit put off by all the tourism that the legends of Spock had brought to their once quiet facility, but they handled the curious with fair grace, and had even set up a visitors’ center at the base of the mountain, where people could learn about the mountain and the monastery without ever actually interfering with the activities that took place within it.

Setak only spent a short time at Seleya. He had no reason to commune with anyone’s katra, and he was far from the monastic type. But he did take time to appreciate the area and what was taking place around him, before reboarding a transport and flying onward.

The next stop on Setak’s journey was Pelasht. Once, a long time ago, it had been a great fortress that had protected a clan in one of Vulcan’s more warlike eras. Today, though, it had become one of the homes of the Vulcan Science Academy, and the fortress had become a great ceremonial and banquet hall that loomed over the other structures of the settlement, where a series of buildings were noted for their beautiful appearance despite the modern construction used to build them. The mix of history and modernity always captivated visitors, and Setak found that he was no different. Exploring the great hall’s surroundings, he found himself quite intrigued with the choices that more modern architects had made to relate

their structures to the surroundings which were so dominated by the old fortress. "I must," he noted to himself in his personal log, "discuss this with father, and learn his views regarding such choices." And once again, Setak was gratified at this new phase of his relationship with his father, so different from the prior one, in which such a discussion would have been problematic at best. What Setak rarely spoke of, even to his parents, was that, for a brief time, his explorations of design and aesthetics as a child had led him to consider following in his father's footsteps as an architect, but in the end, the call of science and exploration had been too strong.

After Pelasht, Setak's next destination was a brief stop at the Plateau of Gol, and then it was on to the Fire Plains in the province of Raal. The Fire Plains were a striking place. They spanned over 2 million hectares in area, and were located roughly 644 kilometers to the northeast of Vulcana Regar, another of Vulcan's larger cities. They spread out at the base of a triangle of active volcanoes: T'raan to the north, T'rial to the southeast, and T'regar to the southwest. Over a number of centuries, barely a decade had passed without an eruption occurring from at least one of the triple peaks, which kept the area very much of interest to geologists and geophysicist. What made it renowned throughout the galaxy, though, were the myriads of multicolored crystal formations which grew throughout the superheated environment. The masses of boiling lava and periodic explosions cast light which was refracted through the crystals to produce an ever-changing array of kaleidoscopic effects.

It had been here, when he was a child, that Setak's appreciation for the interplay of light and color had been born. He had been amazed at the visual impact of this harsh environment, and couldn't wait to explore further. Even after his fascination for the place had evolved from the visual to the scientific, he never lost sight of what had first enthralled him, and that appreciation for aesthetics had never left him. Even now, as a starship science officer, he stood on a ridge above the plains of lava and just gazed at the vista spreading out below and in front of him, and his eyes were drawn to the occasional flashes of rainbow sparkle as the lava's glow refracted through crystals.

"It has been a long time since I've seen you here," came a voice beside him. Setak turned. The speaker was T'Phenat, the tall, statuesque research specialist who had been studying the Fire Plains since they'd known each other as children in school. The years had been more than kind to her, Setak noted. She was a most striking woman, and he paused, if only for the tiniest fraction of a moment, to appreciate her.

"It is good to see you, T'Phenat," he said. "I have been traveling the planet on leave, while the starship to which I am assigned is being refurbished."

"Thank you, Setak. It is agreeable to see you again, as well. I had wondered how long it might be until you returned to Vulcan. The last time I saw you, if memory serves, your emotions had been unsettled by a conflict with your parents."

Trust T'Phenat to remember *that*, Setak thought to himself. "That is true. Matters with my parents have kept me from returning to Vulcan for some time, but those have been addressed, and in a salutary fashion."

"I am pleased to know that." T'Phenat looked at him. "Does this mean you might be returning to Vulcan more frequently?" Something in her expression left him both unsettled and thrilled.

"Perhaps, as my duties allow. At the least, I can say that the reasons that I had stayed away now no longer pertain."

His companion nodded. "Perhaps, if you have seen enough of the Plains, you might join me for a meal? I have much research from the past few years that I could share with you"

Setak wasn't at all sure that sharing research was all that T'Phenat was considering, but even if it wasn't, he decided that he wouldn't mind spending more time with her in the least. "I would enjoy that. I had not necessarily expected to see you, but I would not be so foolish as to reject a fortuitous circumstance when it is presented to me." T'Phenat dipped her head just slightly at the compliment, and led him away from the ridge and toward the complex a few hundred meters distant.

As it turned out, T'Phenat did have research results to share, but Setak had been correct in divining that research was not the only thing T'Phenat had in mind. It was with a particular sense of mischief that she admitted to not being bonded at that time, and Setak was not unwilling to accept the invitation she brought with that admission. In the end, they spent an eminently satisfying day together.

Finally, though, the time drew near for Setak's transport to depart and carry him back to Ta'vistar, where he would spend the last couple of days before leaving Vulcan. T'Phenat accompanied him to the embarkation platform, where they bid their farewells.

"I trust," T'Phenat said, with just a hint of teasing in her voice, "that you will improve the efficacy of your efforts to maintain contact in the future?"

"I shall indeed," Setak told her, "though of course the vicissitudes of time and space, and my ship's missions, will always impact that, whether or not I might wish them to."

"I understand, of course," was her reply. She touched his hand gently with the tips of her fingers, the only visible sign she would allow of their renewed interactions, and with a nod she stepped away from the transport. In his mind, though, Setak could "feel" her mental smile, and gave her back one of his own. He then shouldered his bag and stepped aboard the transport car.

Returning to his parents' home, Setak shared with them some tales of his journeys around Na'nam. They were both very pleased that their son had reconnected to such a degree with his homeworld, and he reassured them that now that their concerns had been acknowledged, and the mutual understanding of all parties' feelings, aspirations, and such had been restored, he would not by choice stay away as long again. For their part, both Syndak and T'Meral

had promised to follow the various goings-on of Star Fleet more closely, and better appreciate the organization for what it was, and not merely as something that had taken their children far from them.

T'Meral, in particular, admitted to being quite intrigued by Setak's reunion with T'Phenat. Setak felt the need to caution her. "Now, Mother, please do not anticipate outcomes which may or may not become reality."

"Of course, my son." But Setak suspected that T'Meral might not be averse to coming up with reasons to improve her own contacts with the younger woman.

All too soon, the time for departure was at hand. Both Syndak and T'Meral, along with Sorvok, accompanied Setak to the shuttle port. Setak had already arranged to meet a Star Fleet shuttle, which would bring him to the *Tucana*, the fast scout which was scheduled for departure to the Sol System within the next few hours.

The shuttlecraft sat out on a platform, awaiting its passengers and crew. The two pilots were in the port's lounge, grabbing a quick drink before they would loft their vehicle to the skies. Two other Star Fleet officers had already passed Setak and his family on their way to board the craft.

"Setak," T'Meral said, "your father and I are very pleased that you chose to spend your leave here on Vulcan. In some ways, we are disappointed in ourselves for not having told you or your sister much earlier about our concerns for you both."

"It is of no further import, Mother" Setak assured her. "The conversations have been had, and we now know much more about each other. I hope only that it does not take very long for you to speak to T'Penra, as well."

"We have asked her to take her next leave here with us, as well," Syndak told his son. "I am certain that she will alert you when we have spoken to her, and of course we will, as well."

"I will look forward to hearing from all of you."

Sorvok stepped up. "It has been agreeable to see you, my brother. And I must thank you once again for speaking to my students. They have not forgotten, and remain only too appreciative."

"I am pleased," Setak replied, "to have been able to speak to them. Please give them my regards."

"I shall."

Just then, the two pilots came out of the lounge and started toward the shuttlecraft. As they passed the family, one of them turned. "Commander Setak? I'm sorry, but we need to get going. Captain Laghari wants to get a move-on."

"Of course," Setak said. "I understand. One moment, please."

"Aye, sir," said the more senior of the pilots, a lieutenant.

As the pilots moved off toward the shuttle, Setak and his family shared their final goodbyes, and then the *Avenger's* science officer strode across the platform and

climbed into the shuttlecraft. Syndak, T'Meral, and Sorvok watched impassively as the craft rose into the orange sky and gradually shrank into a silvery fleck before being lost amidst the high, thin clouds.

The trip back to Sol aboard the *Tucana* had been much faster than the voyage on the *Silmaril*. Unlike a tourist vessel, on which taking one's time was part of the expectation, the *Tucana* was flying "on business", as it were, and made the trip in just under a single day. Soon after Setak completed his personal log entry, the intercom in his cabin beeped.

"Setak here," he said, after tapping the control on the panel inset in the desk.

"Commander, this is Lieutenant Sreel-Ak." Setak nodded to himself, recognizing the voice of the Aurelian communications officer. "We are entering the Sol System now, and Star Fleet has transmitted orders for you in our latest data packet."

"Please transmit them to my quarters, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Bridge out."

As Setak awaited the transmittal of the orders, he reflected on the latest updates he'd received regarding the *Avenger's* condition. Throughout his leave, as he'd journeyed around Vulcan, he'd also been monitoring the progress of *Avenger's* refit and reconditioning, and was gratified to know that all had been going well. The latest reports, which he had read during his journey back to Earth, indicated that the ship, too, was almost ready to resume its journeys.

"It is time for both of us to return to the farther stars," he said softly to himself.

A moment later, there was a beep from the desk terminal, and an icon appeared on its viewer, showing Setak that his orders were now available to be viewed. Setak tapped the icon, and a window opened up to display the text of those orders. As he read, his eyebrow went up. His orders included instructions to report to Star Fleet Command and meet with Admiral Rosenzweig. This piqued Setak's curiosity, since he had expected to be reporting directly to the *Avenger*. He tapped the acknowledgment icon, and then signaled Sreel-Ak.

"Lieutenant, please open a channel to Star Fleet Command and Admiral Rosenzweig's office."

"Aye, Commander."

A moment later, the screen lit with the seal of Star Fleet Command, and a young officer appeared a moment later. "This is Admiral Rosenzweig's office, Commander. Can I help you?"

"I am attempting to discover more information with regard to my orders to meet with the admiral," Setak explained, "in hopes of being properly prepared when I arrive."

"I'm told, sir, that the subject matter of the discussion isn't anything you'll need to be prepared for in any specific way," said the officer, whom Setak noted was wearing the insignia of a lieutenant. "But if you can hold for a moment, I'll be happy to reconfirm that for you."

"Please do, Lieutenant. Thank you."

"Of course, sir. Please stand by." The young man's visage was again replaced with the seal of Star Fleet Command. A couple of minutes later, the lieutenant returned. "Commander, I am told by the admiral's senior adjutant, who emphasizes that he's quoting Admiral Rosenzweig himself, that all will be made clear when you get here." He shrugged. "And that's all they'd share with me, too."

Setak nodded. "Very well. Thank you for your efforts, Lieutenant."

"You're most welcome, sir. Star Fleet out."

As the screen blanked, Setak stared at it for a long moment. He recognized Rosenzweig's sense of humor in the reply to his question, and also had the distinct sense that whatever was going on, it was not to be discussed on an open channel, even well within Sol System. He spoke but a single word to himself. "Intriguing..."

Once the *Tucana* settled into orbit around Earth, Setak gathered his things and bid farewell to the *Tucana's* crew. A small group of officers gathered in one of the ship's lounges, and Setak took a few moments to thank them for their hospitality to a visiting officer.

"Only too happy to have you, Commander," the *Tucana's* commanding officer, Captain Khayri Laghari, said to him. Laghari smiled, perhaps a bit wistfully. "Truth is, I'm just a bit envious of you."

"Oh?" Setak raised a curious eyebrow.

"Serving aboard the *Avenger*. She's something of a storied ship, after all. And you've served on her for a long time."

"I am well-satisfied with my time aboard this vessel," Setak agreed, "but I wonder if perhaps the stories have exaggerated our missions somewhat."

"Maybe so," Laghari said, "but even the declassified portions of the ship's logs, themselves, show plenty for you and your crewmates to be proud of."

"I appreciate that sentiment, Captain, thank you. Still, our crew have simply been doing the jobs we've been asked to perform, no more or less than any Star Fleet crew would have. I am sure the same is true for you and your own crew. Yes?"

"Of course. But still—"

"Captain," Setak interrupted gently. "It is my considered opinion that all of Star Fleet's personnel have worthwhile roles to play. And it is our playing those roles together that makes the service what it is."

Laghari smiled and diplomatically yielded. "I've no doubt you're right, Commander. Thank you."

The ship's executive officer, Commander Quinn, raised a glass. "All right, then," he said, with a light Irish brogue, "to good roles to play for us all."

Calls of "Agreed!" and "Hear, hear!" echoed from the assembled crew, and even Setak nodded and said, "Indeed, Commander. Well spoken."

Soon afterward, Setak took his leave and wished the crew well on their upcoming journeys. And with that, he quietly and without further ceremony left the ship.

Beaming down to the transporter station near Star Fleet Command, Setak first returned to the temporary quarters to which had been assigned for his leave. There he stowed his gear and took a brief break to freshen up before his meeting. Suitably attired, he headed for the Admiralty tower and his meeting with Admiral Rosenzweig.

Reaching the Admiralty, Setak identified himself, and was quickly directed to the turbo-lifts that would bring him to the office segment in which Admiral Rosenzweig worked. Reaching the outer office of Rosenzweig's suite, the Vulcan science officer saw the lieutenant with whom he'd spoken while aboard the *Tucana*.

"Commander!" said the junior officer, rising. "A pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Lieutenant Mark Brand." He started to raise his hand, in what Setak suspected might be a prelude to reaching out for a handshake, but he abruptly caught himself and switched to a slight bow, instead. Setak nodded in response. *Good*, he thought to himself. *This one has paid attention in cultural interaction training.*

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance," was his verbal response.

"Admiral Rosenzweig is waiting for you, sir." He gestured to another door in the wall behind his desk. "If you'll come with me?" Smoothly, he touched a control on his panel, which Setak took to be an alert to the admiral. Setak followed Brand through the door and into the richly-appointed office. Behind Rosenzweig's desk, large windows looked out toward the Golden Gate Bridge, and one wall had a large display screen. The other walls were decorated with artwork of spacescapes, and Star Fleet starships in action.

Rosenzweig was standing in front of the desk. "Mr. Setak, come in, come in. It's good to see you again, Commander."

"Thank you, sir, and likewise."

"Please, sit down." Rosenzweig gestured to a chair set in front of the desk, and Setak crossed the office to sit in the indicated seat. Rosenzweig proceeded to walk back around the desk and sit in his own chair. "So, you've been well, I trust? And your leave was a good one?"

"Indeed, Admiral. It was rewarding in many ways, some which were quite unexpected."

"Really? Interesting." Rosenzweig favored Setak with a slightly raised eyebrow, as if inviting him to continue.

"Let me just say," Setak replied thoughtfully, "that some long-standing concerns have been resolved on a family matter."

"Ahh," Rosenzweig replied, with a small smile of understanding. "Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"Thank you, sir."

"I understand, too, that you traveled back on the *Tucana*."

"Yes, Admiral. Captain Laghari and his crew were most hospitable. They also had a number of quite salutary things to say about the *Avenger* and her history."

"Oh? I didn't realize that people talked about *Avenger* that much."

"It would appear, sir, that we have built a reputation for that vessel over time." Setak couldn't help but allow a hint of satisfaction to creep into his voice. By this time, he had actually served aboard the *Avenger* longer than had Admiral Rosenzweig.

"That's good to know...I think," Rosenzweig answered, with a wink. "And on that note, let me switch gears and get to the matter of why I asked you here." He got serious again. "Commander, I'd like to congratulate you."

"Admiral?" Setak was confused. To the best of his knowledge, nothing so laudable had transpired as to warrant congratulations from a senior Star Fleet admiral.

"Yes, congratulations are in order...for your promotion to the position of executive officer of the *Avenger*."

It's hard to tell when a Vulcan is thunderstruck. He or she will usually make a fairly emphatic effort not to let you know when you've done so. Setak tried. But Rosenzweig had served with Vulcans for over 40 years, and he knew thunderstruck when he saw it, even in a Vulcan. Setak just stared at him for almost a full minute, trying to process what he'd just heard.

Finally, he spoke. "I am sorry, Admiral. Would you please repeat that?"

"I said, Commander, congratulations on becoming exec of the *Avenger*."

Setak had that look of just having heard repeated what he had thought he couldn't believe when he heard it the first time. "I don't understand. Has something happened to Fleet Captain T'HoD?"

"Yes, but nothing untoward. He will in fact continue to serve aboard the *Avenger*, but his new orders place him in the Communications Division."

"And what of Lt. Commander Fortier?" Setak doubted that *Avenger's* chief of communications would take kindly to being unceremoniously removed, especially since he'd not been in that position for all that long.

"Oh, he'll still be there. Captain T'HoD won't be the chief, and a couple of the more senior subordinate communications officers have rotated out and on to new assignments. So there was a perfect place for him."

Setak nodded, not sure that it would be wise to continue to press the point with a senior admiral. "Sir, I had not made any plan to depart the chief science officer billet, and at the time I went on leave, I had not received any indication that I would not be returning to it. May I ask what's being done on that matter?"

"As it happens, unless you choose to decline your new position, we have a new chief science officer for the *Avenger* already positioned. Waiting in the wings, as it were."

"I see." Setak paused, and took a breath. "This is most unexpected, sir. May I ask—?"

"Actually," Rosenzweig interrupted, "no. At this time, further details are not available. This wasn't even my decision, really, but I asked for the honor of telling you about your new posting."

"I see," Setak said once more. It wasn't often that Setak was at a loss for words, and Rosenzweig had to admit that he was getting a certain perverse enjoyment out of seeing him so. However, time being what it was, he couldn't afford to drag this out for too long.

"Mr. Setak, let me be clear. When this situation arose, there were several candidates considered, including personnel serving on the *Avenger* and others looking for this sort of step up. But both Commodore Waidlich and Fleet Captain T'HoD were solidly in agreement that you were their first choice. Their recommendations for you were sterling, and that swayed Fleet Personnel fairly thoroughly." He looked Setak directly in the eye. "So, unless you don't want the job...?"

Setak straightened in his chair, and squared his shoulders. "Admiral, let me not belabor this. If I have been so strongly recommended, and three of the officers whom I hold in the greatest of esteem are all in support of my taking this post, I would be most remiss if I failed to do so. I therefore accept."

Rosenzweig smiled. "I had a feeling you might."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. You recall, I'm sure, that I was the one who recommended you for the position of Chief Science Officer as I was leaving the *Avenger*, even though Lieutenant Antrim was the Assistant Chief at the time. I believed, and Star Fleet agreed, that you have great potential, and today you have taken another step along the path toward fulfilling that potential."

"Lieutenant Antrim was not pleased."

"But you dealt with her effectively, based on the reports I read."

Setak nodded. "There was no alternative that would be acceptable. Still, I did not begrudge her her choice to transfer as soon as was practicable."

"I totally understand that one," Rosenzweig agreed.

"I did not keep in touch with her," Setak admitted. "I believed that she might not desire it. But I do wonder what she has done in the years since that time."

"Let's find out," Rosenzweig said. He turned to his computer station and entered in a series of commands. "Hmm... Looks like she did make it to chief science officer eventually, though on a relatively small science vessel. They're doing good science, don't get me wrong, but as far as 'action' goes, the front-line stuff or the deep space exploration, it doesn't compare to what you've seen aboard the *Avenger*. She might have gotten to a post like yours, but she wasn't ready at that time, and it doesn't look like she's found her way yet."

Setak nodded. "I cannot help but wonder if Siobhan was too quick to allow ambition to interfere with a more natural path to gain beneficial experience."

"Perhaps," said Rosenzweig. He shrugged slightly. "There's nothing wrong with ambition, of course, but one

has to be able to back it up with either talent or knowledge, and Antrim didn't have quite enough of either. She'll get where she wants to be eventually. Just not as fast as she'd wanted."

"Indeed," Setak responded thoughtfully.

Just then, the door chime sounded. Rosenzweig tapped a control, and the door slid open softly. Lieutenant Brand entered. "Sorry to interrupt, sir, but you wanted me to remind you that you've got a meeting coming up soon."

"Ugh," Rosenzweig said softly. A little louder, he said, "Thank you, Lieutenant." Brand nodded and hastily ducked back out. The admiral turned back to Setak. "Sorry about that, Commander, but as they say, duty calls. StratOps Committee, and we'll have a couple of Federation Commissioners looking over our shoulders today. Fun, fun..."

Setak nodded and rose. "I completely understand, sir. Thank you for your time."

"No, thank **you**, Setak. I called you here, after all."

"When an admiral calls, it is still prudent to respond, and your candor and input remain valuable, sir. As it is, I have but a short time, myself, before I am expected aboard the *Avenger*. Commodore Waidlich will be waiting."

"Probably more anxiously than usual. She knew I would be having this conversation with you."

"Understandable." Setak nodded courteously to Rosenzweig. "I shall take my leave now, sir. I would not wish to make you late to your meeting."

The admiral grimaced, then chuckled. "Thanks...I think. Take care of yourself, Setak."

"And you, sir, as well."

Returning to his quarters, Setak checked his terminal and found that the *Avenger* was not yet prepared to receive crew. He had thought he'd be going directly to the ship, but apparently some of the engineering teams were running just a bit behind on the final upgrades to the ship. Setak suspected that Chief Engineer Rielly was not pleased, and decided that being underfoot was not an optimal choice at the moment.

Instead, he spent some time in San Francisco that evening, appreciating the sights and sounds of one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the Federation. He kept a low profile, but observed the goings-on both at Star Fleet Command and in the governmental sectors.

The next morning, however, Setak found a message waiting for him when he returned to his quarters after having a light breakfast. It was the welcome news that the dock personnel had caught up with their task list for the *Avenger*, and the ship was now ready to receive her crew. Eagerly, Setak checked out of his temporary quarters and beamed aboard the ship, though he'd been startled to find, when he changed from his civilian clothes to his uniform prior to departing the residence structure, that his uniform codes had already been changed to replace the familiar blue-gray of Sciences with the white of Command on his undertunic and jacket appurtenances.

Arriving aboard the ship, he was mildly amused to note the nod of recognition from the ensign at the transporter controls, followed by the widening of his eyes as he took in the changed uniform. He wondered idly if word of the change of position had not reached the entire crew, or if the junior officer had simply not had time to process it fully.

"Welcome aboard, Commander," he said. "Do you need a yeoman to help you with your gear?"

"No, thank you, Ensign. I assume that personal effects from living quarters were returned there?"

"That's what I'm told, sir. The boxes everyone left were tagged and tracked, and should be back in our quarters and waiting for us. I haven't even been to mine yet."

"Star Fleet has been effective at this process in the past, so I am sure there'll be no trouble." The cabins needed to be cleared for cleaning and maintenance, but Star Fleet was well-practiced at moving and storing crewmembers' property, so that no one had to worry about dragging crates of stuff through the halls or to their groundside temporary quarters unless they specifically wanted them.

Setak nodded to the ensign and left the transporter room. As he walked toward the nearest turbo-lift, he noted the refreshed look of the corridors and the smell of the cleaning solutions, what one Human crewmate of his from years ago had called "that new car smell". He stepped on the lift and directed it to take him to Deck 5, where the senior officers were billeted.

Arriving at his quarters—which, as it turned out—were not the same cabin as before, owing to his new position as executive officer, Setak found that, indeed, his effects had been stored correctly in that cabin. He glanced at his desk, and noted that a light blinked on his viewer, indicating a message waiting in his queue. Stepping over to the desk, he pressed the control, and the viewer lit with an image of Commodore Waidlich.

The *Avenger's* commanding officer smiled into her pickup. "Welcome back, Mr. Setak," she said. "I hope you had a good leave. Sorry I wasn't there for your little surprise, but Admiral Rosenzweig hogged that for himself." She winked. "Anyway, once you're settled, please come up to my ready room. We've got a lot to discuss, as I'm sure you might guess. I'll see you soon. Waidlich out."

Deeming the return of decorations to his cabin walls of somewhat lower importance than speaking to the CO, Setak left his on the floor next to a crate, and headed out the door, bound for Deck 1. Arriving at Waidlich's ready room, he pressed the door chime control, and was rewarded by Waidlich's voice saying, "Come on in." The door slid open, and Setak stepped through the doorway. "Welcome back, Setak. I hope your leave was a good one?"

"It was, Commodore, thank you. And yours?"

"Very relaxing. I hadn't had this long a leave since...I think since the last time we were between tours. I sure needed it."

"I have observed that Humans sometimes underestimate the need for rest until a situation becomes acute," Setak noted sagely.

Waidlich chuckled. "We do, don't we?" She shook her head. "Either way, this leave was overdue, and plenty good for me. And now we're all back to the grind. And for you, a whole *new* grind. Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Commodore. And for more than just the congratulations. I understand that both you and Fleet Captain T'HoD were very supportive of my taking this post."

"Damn right. There wasn't anybody we felt was more deserving. I'm glad you accepted it."

"I remain curious, however. What led to this? Admiral Rosenzweig explained that Fleet Captain T'HoD will still be serving aboard the ship as a communications officer."

"Yes, that's correct. And, no, it's not a punitive move, either."

"Then I am afraid that I do not understand."

Waidlich gazed at Setak, and he could see a hint of hardening in her eyes. "For the moment," she explained, "you'll have to accept that there are things I can't explain yet. Suffice it to say that it's...a security issue."

Setak raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Is security also behind the posting of a new Science Officer?"

"Actually, no, " Waidlich said. "That's quantum physics."

"Indeed?"

"It's somewhat of a long story, but for now suffice it to say that Aurora had a very **interesting** shore leave." Captain Parker-MacKenzie, as the *Avenger* had returned to Earth, had declared her attention to take an extended trip to Scotland. As Waidlich explained, though, her trip took her rather farther than just Scotland. "She'll have to explain it to you firsthand, I think; I'm not sure I fully understand it. But whatever the details, it seems like she spent some time in an alternate continuum, and either while she was there or in transit, she was...altered mentally. The short version, though, is that she's no longer CMO, but has moved into the Sciences spot, and she has the knowledge to back that up."

"Indeed?" Setak's eyebrow arched upward in that typically Vulcan way.

"Even she doesn't fully understand how and why it happened," Waidlich commented. "She's been debriefed up and down the line, and we're sure it's still her, but evidently some sort of transition brought her and her parallel together in some way that may have altered them both, as if the space-times in which they found themselves were trying to make them 'fit'. But why it didn't reverse when they went back to their respective homes, she has no idea. There's some speculation that during their transitions, they 'intersected' somehow, and their minds became quantum entangled."

"Obviously a great deal has been going on while I was away," Setak quipped.

Waidlich couldn't help but laugh, but even to herself, there was something wry in her reaction. Setak's comment was certainly true, but she had to admit, inside her own

head, that she surely could have done without some of it. Her life since her return from leave had been a lot more complicated than she might have preferred.

Then the commanding officer sighed a little to herself and got back to business. "Okay, here's what you need to know. Most of the details have been sent to your terminal so you can peruse as you see fit, but the basics are that T'HoD is now a senior communications officer, Parker-Mackenzie has moved over to Sciences, and we have a new CMO, named Nebran Draxum. He's Betazoid."

"Interesting," Setak said. Betazed had joined the Federation about 16 years earlier, and there were still a relatively small number of its people who had joined Star Fleet. He expected that to change over time, but he also knew that Betazoids were telepaths, and the milieu of Star Fleet always involved a certain degree of adjustment for telepathic species.

"Yup," Waidlich agreed, nodding. "He seems like a nice enough sort, and is very eager to get out and exploring. He's spent quite a bit of time on a space station, and wanted to transfer to a posting with a bit more going on."

"Hopefully what he finds won't disappoint him," Setak commented.

"Yeah. I'm sure that you've been told not to poke at the question of why T'HoD's been repositioned."

"Yes, although I must admit that this is highly unusual."

Waidlich pitched her voice a little lower, to add authority to her comment. "It is, but let me reiterate. Let it go for now." Then she went on, her voice lighter again. "The rest of the senior staff has remained the same. The computers have received some software upgrades, but I'm assured that they should be relatively transparent, except that various systems should run more smoothly. Mr. Rielly's checking that out right now, I'm told. And, of course, a lot of stuff that had gotten broken over the past few years and which we patched has now been replaced with brand new hardware, so we're top of the line again, at least for our class of ship."

"Very good," Setak said. "And the crew? Are they adapting well to the senior staff changes?"

"Not everyone's back yet, but after a bit of surprise, they seem to be good with it. Most are used to staff changes, after all. And we have about 30% turnover among our crew, as well, as people have gotten new postings."

"I shall be certain to review the current roster, then."

"Good." Waidlich smiled and took a breath. "Okay, I've got some other paperwork to push, so I'll stop taking up your time right now. Go get settled into your quarters, and catch up on all the updates. We'll meet up again before alpha shift and deal with anything that needs attention then, and if something comes up, I know how to find you."

"Of course, Commodore," Setak said. "Until later, then." And with that, he left the ready room.

Setak began by returning to his quarters and re-ordering his personal effects. This didn't take a huge amount of time; he was efficient about his decorations, and there were few "creature comforts" he required that

depended on material objects. His artwork took the longest to arrange, as he had to make a few new decisions about placement, based on the slightly different layout of his new cabin.

His personal space having been established as he wished, the executive officer—he had to get used to thinking of himself that way—settled at his desk to review the reports of the ship’s current status and the latest on the members of the crew. He carefully took note of new faces, as well as established crew who had received promotions during the ship’s layover. After a time, though, he felt that he had absorbed as much information as he could just by reading files. It was time, he judged, to begin to circulate around the ship and see what was actually going on. Setak had taken to touring the science labs when he was chief science officer, dropping in to actually see what his staff was doing instead of just relying on reports. It fostered a positive, encouraging atmosphere that proved particularly effective with more emotional species like Humans. By extension, Setak reasoned, taking a similar approach as executive officer had the potential for similarly positive results. He might not be as broadly jovial a personality as D’HamYu T’HoD, but he made sure the personnel under his leadership were appreciated.

The first stop, or series of stops, really, was the science labs. The crewmembers in the Sciences Division were pleased to see him, but they wondered what was happening with regard to the changes in leadership aboard the ship. A common feeling was summed up by Lieutenant Nguyen in Astrophysics. “Commander, I’m not sure I get it,” she told Setak. “Dr. Parker-MacKenzie is now going to be the sciences chief? Is she ready for that?”

“It is a long story, and I am not certain that even I have all the details, but the short version is that, yes, as she is now, she has the necessary qualifications.”

“As she is now?” Nguyen wondered. “She’s not an alternate Parker-MacKenzie, is he?”

“No, not precisely. But she did encounter an alternate existence, and she was affected by it.”

“How is she coping?” asked Ensign Ecks.

“It was apparently difficult at first, but she has adapted,” Setak explained.

“I have to be honest, sir,” Nguyen admitted. “I’m a bit uncomfortable with her taking on such a post so soon after she went through whatever it is that she went through? I mean, what if things start to go haywire?”

“Star Fleet Medical is confident in her abilities,” Setak said, having seen that notation in Parker-MacKenzie’s file updates. “I am sure she will do fine. I am also sure she will convene a staff meeting in the near future and discuss matters with you. Until she does so, speculation on my part would be inappropriate.”

“I understand, of course, sir,” Nguyen replied. “It’s just weird, y’know?”

“Indeed.”

Setak had several other conversations with his staff that seemed to echo this one, and he was consistently circumspect, feeling that it would not be right for him to

say or do anything that might undercut whatever steps Parker-Mackenzie might take to settle her own leadership of the division. He knew, however, that for a time, he would—in his role as executive officer—have to keep an eye on Sciences, just to make sure his own expressed optimism wasn’t misplaced.

After having been to the sciences facilities, Setak’s next stop was sickbay, where he introduced himself to Doctor Draxum. “A pleasure to meet you, Commander,” Draxum said.

“Are you finding your new assignment to your liking?” Setak asked him.

Draxum chuckled. “Well, we are still in spacedock, so it might be just a little early to tell, but things have been pretty busy, what with getting ready to pull out of here, so I can’t claim boredom, at least.”

“Boredom, I find, is rarely a long-term problem on the *Avenger*,” Setak commented dryly.

“Good. Back on Station Dylan, there were times when I had a great urge to start unscheduled crew physicals just to have something to do.” He paused. “The good news, at least, was that combat casualties and such were pretty rare.”

“We do undertake a broad variety of missions, so I am sure you will find your skills challenged, hopefully in positive ways. We have had our share of combat, but thankfully not as much as some vessels.”

“Good to know that it’s not a bloodbath,” Draxum said. After a pause, he added, “I always just wanted to expand the limits of medical knowledge, and being out on the edge of known space seemed like a good way to do that.”

“That is true,” Setak agreed. “Tell me, Doctor, are you at all familiar with the circumstances that brought you to this ship?”

“Other than the fast courier which took me here from Dylan?”

“More precisely, **why** you got this assignment.”

Draxum shrugged. “All I can tell you is that I’d been on a waiting list for a few months, and then I got a call to get myself to Terra, that the *Avenger* had an opening. Well, when orders like that come through, orders you’ve been waiting for, y’don’t argue, so here I am. The staff here are telling me that our new Science Officer used to be our Medical Officer, which is a little unusual, I admit, but if that’s how things worked out, so be it.”

“Indeed. It appears that my answers will await a personal conversation with Doctor Parker-MacKenzie. I have not yet found her, though.”

“I’m sure she’ll be along soon enough,” Draxum said reassuringly.

“As am I. Thank you, Doctor,” Setak told him.

“Any time, Commander.”

Setak then bid Draxum farewell and continued his tour, heading next for Main Engineering.

Arriving at Main Engineering, the first thing Setak heard as he came through the large doors was Captain

Rielly booming out orders from near the main intermix shaft. "Lieutenant Cristarella, bring me a number 3 spanner!"

"Aye, sir!" came a female voice from across the chamber.

Reaching the central core area, Setak took note of Rielly leaning out toward the vertical intermix shaft, adjusting one of the seals. Cristarella was standing by with an equipment case, in case Rielly needed any more hardware. The chief engineer glanced back and saw Setak.

"Hello, Mr. Setak. Welcome back."

"Thank you, Matt."

"As you can see," Rielly said with a *harrumph*, "now I have to spend extra time getting the engines back up to the specs I had them at **before** the refitting engineers got at them! Apparently they did **not** read my operations notes."

"Evidently not," Setak said. "I will make a note of that in my report, suggesting that review of such documentation be a first step in any future refit on this vessel."

"Good." Rielly paused for just a second. "Congrats, by the way, on taking over XO."

"Thank you."

"Do you have any idea about why this happened?"

"Unfortunately not, Matt. I have been trying to find out, myself. And so far, both Admiral Rosenzweig and Commodore Waidlich have suggested that this is something into which I'd best not pry. I had not even been aware of the change until I returned to Earth."

"Heh. So you got ambushed with it, too, eh? How was your vacation, by the way?"

"It was...rewarding. Thank you for asking."

"You went home, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"Good for you."

"And your leave, Matt? It went well, I trust?"

"Remind me to regale you with the whole story at some point. Let's just say that I started out on Risa, expecting some nice, relaxing time off, and soon enough I was in the midst of an adventure."

"Intriguing..."

"A bit of strange new worlds, a bit of old-fashioned gumshoeing. Detective work," he added, noting Setak's quizzical reaction to the old-fashioned euphemism. "Definitely an adventure."

"I shall look forward to hearing about it."

"Good." Rielly smiled. "Anyway, I'd best get back to work on these engines."

"Of course," Setak replied. "I shall not distract you further. I must continue to learn what I can about what has been happening as regards this ship's command."

"Good luck!" Rielly told him. "Meanwhile, I can promise you that I'll have the engines all tuned-up and ready to go before the *Avenger* clears spacedock."

"Thank you, Matt. I appreciate your diligence."

Rielly smiled. "Any time, XO."

Setak left Engineering, and proceeded forward to the Security section on Deck 7. Finding Security Chief Horton in

his office, Setak reviewed the *Avenger's* status from the point-of-view of internal security readiness.

"Oh, we're ready," Horton told him confidently. "I've had the team hand-check every weapon in the armory, and we've been drilling since the moment everyone was back from leave."

"Very good, Captain," Setak told him. "I appreciate your diligence."

"Thanks, Setak," Horton replied.

"Tell me, Joe," Setak continued, gingerly raising the question that was on his mind, "Did anyone give you any insights regarding the changes of positions at the command level on this ship?"

"Unfortunately not," Horton told him. "I got the list of access revisions, and I made sure they were all updated in the main computer. But the reasoning wasn't shared with me. I figured I didn't have any need to know."

"Interesting," said Setak. "I had been advised that the change was a matter of security, and that I should not pursue it too deeply. But if the ship's security chief hasn't been provided with the details, then any such security issues must be beyond the shipboard level."

"I guess so," Horton said, nodding. "I can tell you, just because I noticed it, that the Intelligence Ops Center has been getting quite a bit more than its usual level of use in recent days. I didn't go poking around too much, 'cause it's really outside my area, but I keep track of it, anyway, just in case something comes up later."

"A wise precaution," Setak affirmed.

"I don't know if it means anything," Horton said.

"It might not," Setak noted agreeably, "but then again, it might." Ever since the time of ADM Rosenzweig's command of the ship, there'd been a small, quiet portion of *Avenger's* mission that had an Intelligence component. Captain Frank Warren was the ship's current Intel Officer, a position he'd held for a number of years. Prior to Warren, the ship's Intelligence Officer had been Stephen Buonocore. The Intelligence Operations Center was located on Deck 9, accessed from one end of the inner concentric corridor. Not all ships of the *Avenger*-class even had one, but the *Avenger's* had, on occasion, been a location where vitally important information handling took place.

Setak returned his attention to Horton, and said, "I appreciate your time, Captain. Please do not discuss this with anyone else."

"Of course, Setak."

"We shall speak later, then. If you'll excuse me." Horton bid him goodbye, and Setak left the Security area.

It was time, the exec decided, to pay the Intel Ops Center a visit. It wasn't a place he often had gone as chief science officer, and never on his own, but, he reasoned, as executive officer, he should be familiar with everything that happened on the ship, and that included even the shadowy parts. He rode a lift down and deliberately directed it to the stop accessing the corridor at the opposite end from where the door to Intel Ops was located. Walking the length of that ring of passageway would take but moments, really,

and since Deck 9 was also the location of the computer lab and the three lower viewing galleries, his presence wouldn't be considered notable until he was nearly at his true destination.

The area did, he observed, seem more active than usual. Some of the people he saw were members of the ship's crew, both people he knew and even a few of the newer personnel whom he had not yet met. Fortunately, the time he had taken to commit the new crewmembers' identities to memory would serve him well, and it was a relatively easy task to recognize those who were members of the crew, note the few remaining dock personnel (who were mostly concerned with final tests on the computer equipment), and then observe the very few others who fell into neither category. Not unexpectedly, most of those were moving around near the Intel Ops Center.

Having observed enough, Setak concluded that it was time to act. He headed for the doors to the Intel Ops Center. The doorway itself was unassumingly normal, but it was notable in that a security guard stood watch outside. Setak walked up to him. "Hello, Ensign."

"Sir," the guard responded stolidly.

"I trust your watch has been free of incident thus far?"

"Yes, sir, it has. Thank you."

"Very good." Setak started for the door, and the guard tensed, just a little.

"Commander, I have to remind you that you'll need full clearance to enter that area without being accompanied by a cleared senior officer."

"I fully understand," Setak said. "As you may know, I am now the executive officer of this ship."

"Yes, sir."

Setak decided that being the exec had at least one pleasing aspect. "Ensign, as I'm sure you know, that does give me clearance to access any part of this ship into which I feel it necessary to go."

"But, sir, I—" The guard was looking decidedly uncomfortable, clearly caught between two sets of instructions.

"Do not concern yourself. You may enter into your log, and respond to anyone who asks, that I have, as the saying goes, 'pulled rank'. And I am going into that room."

The ensign looked, if anything, relieved. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He stepped away from the door, and said, more quietly, "I hope you find out whatever it is you need."

"Thank you, Ensign." And Setak approached the double doors, which obediently slid aside to permit him entry.

Moving into the room, Setak was unsurprised to find Captain Warren, sitting at a workstation and talking quietly to the personnel moving around the room while reviewing updates from Star Fleet Intelligence. In the end, too, his suspicions were proven out, because standing near the central cluster of consoles was Fleet Captain D'HamYu T'HoD. Warren looked calm, but T'HoD's mien quickly assumed a nonplussed expression. He tried to cover, though.

"Setak! What brings you down here?"

"Hello, D'HamYu," Setak replied. "I have been visiting various areas of the ship to assess their status prior to our departure from dock." He made something of a show of looking around, taking in the activities around them, and then added, "An interesting place for a communications officer to be, wouldn't you say?"

"It is, actually. But mainly I'm here 'cause the Intel folks asked me to check their comm systems."

"I see. And their squad of talented technicians, who have been reviewing the systems while most of our crew have been away on leave, were not up to the task of making sure these systems would be able to communicate?"

"Well," T'HoD began. "There are a few idiosyncrasies..."

"Captain, let us dispense with the excuses." Setak glanced around. No one seemed to be paying attention, but he had little doubt that several pairs of ears were surreptitiously being oriented in their direction. "Perhaps we should continue this privately. Captain Warren?" Frank looked up. "May we make use of your office for a brief time?"

Warren nodded. "Sure, Setak, go ahead."

"Thank you." Setak gestured toward the doorway, indicating that T'HoD should precede him, and the two stepped into the office. As the door slid shut, Setak tapped the locking control and turned to face the Efosian officer. "It is not my intention to, as the Humans say, 'blow your cover', whatever it may be. But if I am to function as executive officer of this ship, I need to know what is happening aboard her."

"Setak, it's just a security thing," T'HoD said. "We—that is, Star Fleet Command and I—felt that I'd need the freedom of movement I could get as a lower-positioned officer to make this assignment work. And I'm sure a few people have already told you, even as XO, your purview doesn't cover the details of this assignment itself. But I will tell you that it won't impact the operation of the ship."

Setak gave T'HoD a skeptical look. "Would you," he asked, "be able to alter, or even influence, the *Avenger's* assignments, or cause the ship to break away from one mission to attend to another deemed more critical to Federation security?"

"It wouldn't be typical," T'HoD replied.

"But you could," Setak pressed.

"Yes, I could," T'HoD admitted.

"And that mission might be considered secret?"

"Yes, it could. It's not likely to happen with any regularity, but it is possible that it could."

"How, then," Setak went on, "do you expect the senior officers in the ship's chain of command to function if they are unaware of what's going on?"

T'HoD took a deep breath, and then said, "Judy knows, as CO."

"Indeed? Interesting."

"But I will agree with you. As XO, you should be read into this, too. Perhaps we should have done that right-off, even before you started poking around." T'HoD gave Setak

a wry smile, making sure that the new exec understood that his comment was more compliment than criticism.

Setak began to relax, just a little. "It would have simplified existence in a number of ways."

"Well, what can I tell ya'?" T'HoD commented. "I was a strong supporter of your assignment to your new job, but even I underestimated your tenacity, that you'd keep investigating even after everyone up to a senior admiral told you not to."

"He did not do so, in so many words."

"But he did hint that this was maybe something to leave alone, right?"

Setak nodded. "Yes, that he did."

"And Judy was more direct about it, yes?"

"Yes, she was."

"But you still kept pushing," T'HoD went on.

"In my judgment, if I am to serve as executive officer of this ship, I needed to know. I will not compromise your situation, Captain, but even then, I can help you more efficiently by being aware of what's going on than not."

"Thanks, Setak. I appreciate your discretion, and your assistance."

"Of course. And, Captain, thank you for your support of my appointment as executive officer. I will do my best to justify the support I've received from both you and Commodore Waidlich."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," T'HoD said, with a smile.

"Thank you again." Setak paused for a moment, then went on, "In any event, with this matter resolved, allow me to leave you to your duties. I have matters to attend to, as well. And, just to reiterate, as I said, I will support your mission in whatever way I can, but I hope that you will not forget to trust your shipmates. We are, as the saying goes, all in this together."

T'HoD chuckled. "You do make a cogent point, Commander. Thanks." Setak nodded, and quietly made his exit. As the door slid shut, T'HoD reached down and tapped the control for the desktop intercom unit. "T'HoD to Waidlich."

"Waidlich," came the voice of the ship's CO.

"Setak was just here."

"I see."

"I told you he'd figure it out," T'HoD continued, with just the slightest hint of reproof in his voice.

"So you did," Judy replied. "Well, I have to admit, I was curious to see how far he'd go in trying to get the answers. Even Admiral Rosenzweig was pretty certain Setak wouldn't stop asking questions." She paused for a moment, then added, "It'll be easier, now that he's in the loop, but we still needed him to think that he outwitted an attempt to keep things from him. That will pay dividends later."

After leaving the Intelligence Operations Center, Setak returned to the bridge. Having scooped up a datapadd from his office on Deck 2 while on the way, he proceeded to link it to the various status reports from assorted ship's systems, and was cross-checking that information against the readouts on the array of viewers at each station. There

was still some time before the ship was scheduled to leave dock, and only a couple of crewmembers were on the bridge at that time. Setak found the quiet calming, but he knew that the excitement would soon be starting as the rest of the ship's officers arrived.

Just as he had reached that point in his thought, there was a soft hiss, and the turbo-lift doors slid apart, allowing Captain Aurora Parker-Mackenzie to step onto the bridge. Setak moved to join her at the Sciences station.

"Greetings, Captain."

"Hi, Setak," Parker-Mackenzie said brightly. "How was your leave?"

"Rewarding and edifying on multiple levels, I must admit. The universe very often does not do what I expect."

Aurora laughed out loud. "Hah! That's certainly true! The universe, or even the multiverse, is a strange thing indeed!"

"Commodore Waidlich gave me a short précis of what happened," Setak said, "but I got the distinct impression that there's a lot more to the story."

"I'm not sure I even fully understand it," Aurora told him. She settled into the seat at the Sciences station, and Setak leaned against the console, listening. "You recall that I was planning to vacation in Scotland, right?" At Setak's nod, she went on, "Well, I was out exploring a few days after I'd gotten there, poking around one of the megalithic artifacts—no, not Stonehenge—when suddenly the air around me seemed to get ionized. Before I knew it, everything just seemed to...change! I was somewhere else, but still near a megalith identical to the one I'd been exploring. As I wandered away from it, and was looking around, I started seeing all sorts of subtle differences. It was still Earth, still Scotland, but...not..."

"An alternate continuum?"

"It seemed so, and when I saw people again—the very same people, I thought, that I'd come out to that artifact with—they were all just a little bit different. That was when I started to get scared, because, well, sometimes these sorts of journeys are one-way trips, and sometimes they get that way because one doesn't stay near the point where one passed through whatever bridged the universes."

"That is true."

"So I told them what I thought had happened. Thank goodness they took me seriously! They knew I was in Star Fleet, and figured I'd seen enough weird stuff to know what I was talking about."

"What did they suggest for you to do?"

"First we contacted Star Fleet, and before you knew it, there were a whole group of techs out on the moors looking for weird energy signatures. As it happened, it wasn't long before they found them. For a while, they weren't sure if I should be kept nearby, or not allowed anywhere near the area, but finally they decided to keep me nearby. They were worried that my...err...doppelganger was somewhere else, too, and we'd need to exchange again to get back to where we belonged."

"That would seem logical," Setak noted. "Often such transpositions are symmetrical, such as the incident in

which a landing party from the *Enterprise* transposed with their equivalents from the Terran Empire, or another case—ironically, also with the *Enterprise*—in which Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, and Doctor McCoy very briefly changed places with a group of actors from a universe in which much of our world was a fictional construct portrayed in a 20th Century visual entertainment.”

“Right! Finally, they started tracking energy spikes in the same area of the megalithic artifact, and they made sure I was where I needed to be. I could almost feel space-time seeming to snap back into its normal position, and when the effect cleared again, I was back in our continuum. But here’s the kicker. One thing I found out was that the other me hadn’t been a doctor; she’d been a science officer. Some of her history had been different, too. And when we passed on the way back to our own worlds, we didn’t just pass **by** each other. We passed **through** each other. And when we separated, I realized that I’d absorbed a vast amount of her memories and knowledge, along with my own.”

“Fascinating,” said Setak. “I assume the reverse is also true.”

“I do, too, but there’s no easy way to verify it.”

“A valid point. It seems you may have undergone a sort of quantum entanglement event as your pathways through space-time briefly intersected.”

“Maybe so.” Aurora shrugged. “When I got back, though, now with all this additional knowledge, I realized something. I didn’t want to be just a doctor anymore.” At Setak’s raised eyebrow, she continued, “Don’t get me wrong, I am proud of all I accomplished as a doctor, but I’ve always also had an interest in the sciences in general, along with medicine, and this experience...well...however this knowledge expansion happened, it was like getting a whole additional college education, all at once, without having to go back to school to achieve it. So I approached Star Fleet about switching into the Sciences Division.”

“And fortuitous circumstances allowed you to do so,” the exec said.

“Exactly. The first thing I find out—apparently before you did, even; sorry about that—is that D’HamYu isn’t going to be XO anymore, and that Star Fleet intends for you to take that job, opening up the Chief Science Officer post. I was pretty sure you’d take the new post, so I felt pretty safe in accepting a switch into the open position.”

“I am pleased that you were not disappointed,” Setak said.

“And at least, with my interest in science already there, the switchover was a lot easier than if I’d come back with a head full of, say, engineering skills.”

“A salient point, indeed,” Setak said.

The two spent a bit of time reviewing the current status of the Sciences Division, both from Setak’s last reports and the impressions he’d gotten from his tour around the ship. Parker-Mackenzie noted that she’d read the past few months’ worth of Setak’s reports, and was really grateful for their thoroughness and completeness.

“They were a huge help in making sure I knew what I needed to, not just about the technical stuff, but about the people in the division,” she told him.

“I do recommend that you meet with them quickly, though,” Setak said. “There is a degree of uncertainty among a number of the Sciences personnel.”

“I’ll definitely do that. It’s a jarring enough change for me; I can just imagine what some of them must be thinking!”

“Exactly.” Setak nodded emphatically.

“It’s at the top of my list. I want them to start getting a feeling for what my expectations are, anyway, and how they’ll be similar to, or different from, yours.”

“That is good thinking,” Setak said, reassured by Parker-Mackenzie’s planned approach.

“Thanks.”

“I appreciate, as always, your diligence, Captain,” the exec emphasized. “If you will excuse me, though, I must exercise some diligence of my own and finish my pre-flight report for Commodore Waidlich.”

“Of course, Setak. Don’t let me keep you.” She smiled at him, and Setak nodded in response and moved on to the next station on his checklist.

When Waidlich arrived on the bridge an hour or so later, Setak met her at the command chair, and presented her with his full status report. Handing her the datapadd, he gestured to the now-fully-staffed bridge and said, “Commodore, the ship is fully ready to depart. All crewmembers, both veterans and newly-assigned personnel, have reported aboard and are where they are supposed to be. As you can see, the bridge personnel are all here.”

“I see indeed,” Waidlich said with a satisfied smile. Gesturing at the datapadd, she added, “I also see that you’ve been putting your time to good use since coming back aboard. Half the crew I spoke to in the time it took me to leave my quarters and get up here told me that you’d stopped by to see them at their posts.”

“I did tour a large amount of the ship, yes,” Setak acknowledged. “I felt it was important to do so while settling into my new role.”

“I agree,” Waidlich said with a chuckle. “I did something similar, myself, when I became XO.”

“I shall endeavor to serve you well, Commodore.”

“Thanks, Setak. I’ll hold you to that.” She favored him with a wink, then straightened up in her chair. Looking around the bridge, she said, “So, shall we put this show on the road?”

“Indeed. I do believe it is time.”

“Yup.” Waidlich raised her voice just slightly. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have places to go and things to do. Is everyone ready?”

A chorus of responses—“Yes, ma’am”, “Aye, aye, Commodore”, “Never readier!”—came from around the bridge. Waidlich chuckled.

"Excellent." She glanced at the navigator. "Lt. Commander M'reen, you have our destination information?"

"Aye, Commodorrre," the Caitian navigator said. "Courrrse prrrogrrrammed and laid in."

"Very good, thank you." Glancing to Communications, Waidlich said, "Ensign Schwegler, please contact the dockmaster and request clearance to depart."

Schwegler nodded, and a couple of moments later, replied, "We have it, Commodore, and Dock Control says, 'Good luck and smooth sailing'."

"Send our thanks," Waidlich told him. Turning back to face the Helm station, she added, "Commander Ragin, please take us out."

As the various members of the bridge crew turned their attention to their stations, and the *Avenger* began to slide forward and out of the dock, for just a moment, Setak found himself moving almost instinctively toward the Sciences station. He caught himself almost immediately, but realized that Waidlich had noticed anyway. He offered a small shrug, and she returned an understanding smile. Setak turned back toward the main viewer as the dock slid away and off-screen, and the *Avenger* again returned to the environment for which she was best suited, the starry depths of space. Gazing out toward those depths, the *Avenger's* new executive officer could only wonder what new adventures awaited. And then he turned his attention to his own duties, as the journey continued.

-----THE END-----